

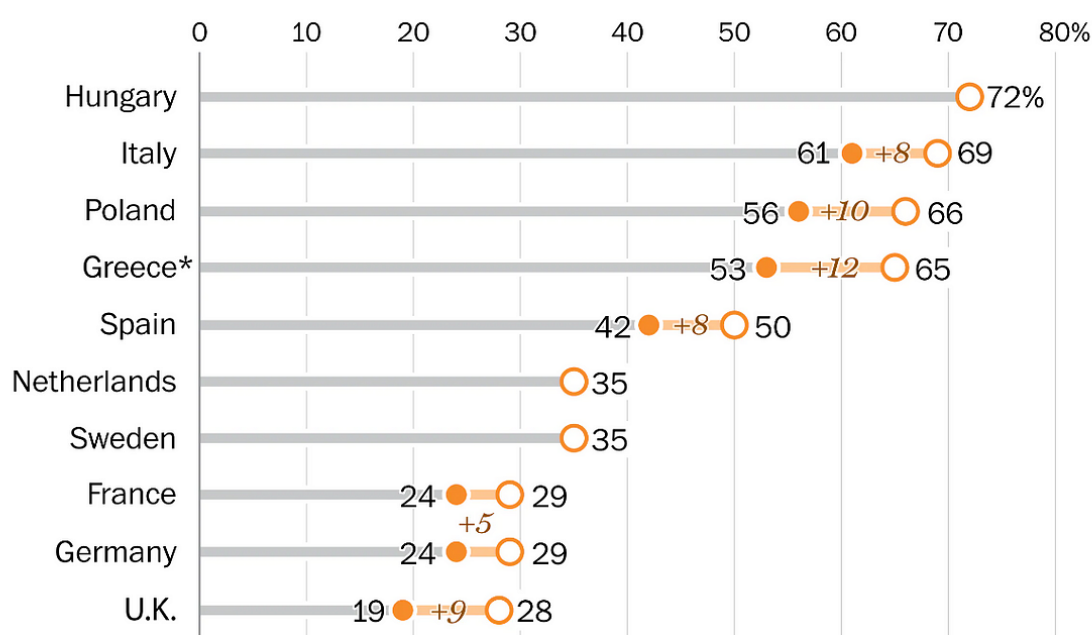
# Contesting Islamophobia and the Role of *Wasatiah* Islam in Europe

Ima Sri Rahmani (UCLouvain Belgium/UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, Indonesia)

---

## Unfavorable views of Muslims on the rise in Europe

Percent unfavorable view of Muslims in ● 2015, ○ 2016



Pew Research Center cited by Adam Taylor

2021 is a historic year for the development of the phenomenon known as Islamophobia. For the first time in world history, representatives from different countries met online to commemorate the 'World Day to Combat Islamophobia', which is observed every 15 March.

The event was attended by the President of the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General, the OIC Secretary-General, and the UN high-level representative for the Alliance of Civilisations, as well as ministers and permanent representatives of UN members in New York.

In addition, for the first time in UN history, the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief delivered his report entitled '*Countering Islamophobia/Anti-Muslim Hatred to Eliminate Discrimination and Intolerance Based on Religion and Belief*'.

Thus, these two important events have agreed and supported by acclamation, the word ‘*Islamophobia*’ to be used in official forums even though it is used interchangeably with the word ‘anti-Muslim hatred’.

### **UN and ECLJ on Islamophobia**

However, the UN’s stance has been criticised. The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) in the article ‘*Islam’s successful lobby at the UN*’ (2021) argues that the word ‘*Islamophobia*’ is highly problematic. Firstly, it fails to provide a clear definition of ‘Islam’. In an analytical report entitled ‘*l’islam, l’islamisme, et l’islamophobie en Europe*’ (2010), the ECLJ distinguished between the concepts of ‘*Islam*’ (institutionalised religion) and ‘*Islamism*’ (Islamic political movement).

Secondly, the report should have followed human rights procedures. Therefore, the report is considered to go beyond its proper mandate. In this case, criticising a religion is part of the freedom of speech protected by law. Therefore, thirdly, the report could not distinguish between religion and race, as the law only protects people, not religions.

### **Exploring the meaning of Islamophobia : Local and Global Context**

This debate leads to the question, why is Islamophobia so difficult to define objectively? Firstly, in the ‘*local*’ European context, as Glavanis P.M. (2013) points out in his paper ‘*National and European Policies Against Islamophobia*’, Islamophobia has long historical roots in European society.

No wonder, if we could already find this word in 1899 in the newspaper ‘*La Politique Coloniale*’. Bonhoure, a journalist at the newspaper, explained the different attitudes that emerged from the public regarding the journey of a religious leader named Sheikh Senoussi from Tripolitania.

Those who thought that the Sheikh was on a spiritual journey and carrying a mission from the Sultan were categorised as Islamophiles (seeing Islam more positively). However, those categorised as Islamophobes argued that the Sheikh’s journey was a symptom of the rise of Muslim fanaticism. It was not until 1910 that the word Islamophobia first became a term used in official historical records.

At least two writings can be found. First, in Maurice Delafoce’s historical account in his article entitled ‘*l’état Actuel de l’islam dans l’Afrique Occidentale Française*’ and, second, Alain Quellien’s article entitled ‘*La Politique Musulmane dans l’Afrique Occidentale Française*’. In general, in both writings, the word Islamophobia refers to the approach taken by the French colonial government towards the people in its colonised countries.

At the time, Islamophobia was used as a balance between Islamic identity on the one hand, and Christian and French identity on the other. However, as Karima Lazali (2018) explains in her book ‘*Le trauma Colonial*’, colonisation inherits the nature of the monarchical system. It has difficulty relinquishing its control, slowly taking power over the bodies, then the symbols (language), and the imaginations of those colonised (various myths and legends).

Therefore, for Edward Said (1978) in his book ‘*Orientalism*’, the Islamophobia that emerges today is an attempt by the colonisers to reinforce past hegemony. Islamophobia transforms the

conflict arena from an open battlefield to a process of mental subjugation. It should be underlined that Islamophobia today is directly linked to '*third-generation immigrants*', who have been European citizens since birth.

Secondly, in a global context, the word Islamophobia is intertwined with political issues. Thus, it becomes difficult to distinguish between religious and political issues. Pascal Bruckner (2017) in his book '*Un Racisme Imaginaire*' argues that Islam, in the context of Islamophobia, is not only a '*problem*', but also a '*symptom le vieux monde*' (symptom of the ancient world), a world that is considered to be against '*the spirit of Western enlightenment*', especially after 11 September.

Pierre-André Taguieff (2017) in his book '*l'Islamisme et nous. Penser l'ennemi imprévu*' argues that the word Islamophobia, which semantically has a vague meaning, is misused. This misuse is generally done by Muslims who hold Islamist views such as Salafi-Wahabi (S-W), Muslim Brotherhood (MB), Hizb ut Tahrir (HT), Takfiri-Jihadists (T-J), and others. It is done against those who have a different Islamic understanding from them.

### **Islam and Islamism in Islamophobia**

Moreover, it is perpetrated against those who disagree through intimidation and guilt-inducing accusations in the name of respecting religious freedom and anti-racist norms. They are seen as the sole representation of Islam, and the most perfect example of the religion. Taguieff argues that this is inspired by their totalitarian outlook.

Islamists aim to establish an Islamic Empire, in the form of an Islamic republic or caliphate in a particular region, which can be expanded into a universal Islamic empire. According to Taguieff, Islam as an institutionalised religion (consisting of the main groups: Sunni and Shia) is not Islamism.

Nevertheless, Taguieff does not deny that Islamism is an integral part of Islam. This is because Islamism is considered to have principles that are at odds with the West, which values the principles of democracy, freedom and diversity. Taguieff criticises the view of Islamism that makes the Koran a '*Mein Kampf*' or a tool for war, which is considered to be opposed to the tradition of critical analysis of religious '*doctrine*', because its purpose is not intellectual or spiritual. Instead, the Koran is used as a justification to mobilise the masses against those who are different, driven by '*the lust*' for power.

As a result, the majority of Muslims who disagree with Islamism are in a difficult state. They are caught between Islamism (IM, HT, S-W, T-J) and anti-Islam (Extreme Right, closed European societies) simultaneously. Even worse, the increasing use of the word Islamophobia in the 1980s to criticise Islamism has confused European society and Muslims in general. It was a mixture of criticism (of political Islam) and calls for hatred (from the far right and others).

It is understandable why Muslims in Europe are currently experiencing a difficult situation. They seem to represent an imaginary '*enemy*' that is difficult to ascertain by making religious symbols that are considered markers of '*Islamism*': headscarves, beards, mosque domes, Arabic language, Arabic names, halal labels, animal slaughter methods, and so on. Muslim communities in Europe are currently experiencing a difficult situation.

In such a situation, distinguishing between Islam (as a religion) and Islamism (as a political movement), becomes a problem to be solved. How can we distinguish between Muslims (in general) and Islamists (IM, HT, S-W, T-J), especially in a country with a majority Muslim population?

How can a Muslim accuse other Muslims of having Islamophobic views? It makes no sense. This reminds me of President Soekarno's statement (1966) in his autobiography. In his interview with Cindy Adam, he expressed his feelings. Bung Karno said that '*Leftophobia*, the disease of fear of leftist ideas, is a disease I fear as much as *Islamophobia*'.

By expressing this, he was trying to illustrate the tendency of people to see the efforts made towards the Marhaenism movement as left-leaning and accused of being a form of communist movement. This is because the movement was against the imperialist and capitalist powers of the time. "*The desire to spread social justice is a leftist thing. It doesn't have to be communist,*" Bung Karno said.

At this point, we can see that Islamophobia is not just a panorama of a deep history of hatred. It is also longstanding and global. Today, we can understand the concerns expressed by the ECLJ organization cited above. Taguieff asserts that the reproduction of the '*monstre politico-religieux*' will be an endless process like a '*vicious circle*', unless the Muslim community itself can rethink the teaching of 'jihad' in a more compromising way.

The turmoil of the endless civil wars in the Middle East is a common concern for the emergence and development of a wave of '*war*' spirit in other regions, including Indonesia. We can see and feel the sparks in that direction lately.

Therefore, the presence of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia is a great hope in accommodating the world's expectations: spreading '*wasatiah*' Islam, moderate Islam. As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, the Muslim community in Indonesia is certainly an example '*par excellant*' in realising the message of the Quran (QS. 2: 143).

A people who are '*fair*' and able to be an antidote to the '*obsession*' of Islamist groups (IW, HT, S-W, T-J) to build an Islamic state like ISIS, as well as an antidote to the '*obsession*' of anti-Islamic groups (*extreme right*) to '*dehumanize*' Muslims. Hence, the dynamics of the Muslim community in this country are always in the spotlight.

### **Can Wasatiah Islam be a viable alternative?**

To conclude, I would like to quote Sam Keen (2010) in his book '*In the Dwelling in the Absence of the Sacred God*', that religion is a powerful resource. Whether it means '*hope or misery*', depends on the ability of its adherents to make themselves instruments for the good of themselves and their neighbourhoods.

In the process, in the name of God, they are '*capable*' of anything, including creating and carrying out '*holy wars*' and '*holy violence*'. But above all, they neglect the power of imagination, a '*sense of humour*' and the ability to be self-critical. It is in this context that '*wasatiah*' Islam is expected to give people the '*self-authorization*' to seek and cure the ills caused by a closed and narrowly interpreted religion and a tyrannical political system.

The reinterpretation of religion will only happen if its adherents fully realize their authority in experiencing their sacred religion, and create stories that allow them to share their experiences in their environment.

---

(This article has been published in Media Indonesia newspaper, [Menyoal Islamofobia dan Peran Islam Wasatiah di Eropa \(mediaindonesia.com\)](#) and published in English in the Medium [Contesting Islamophobia and the Role of Wasatiah Islam in Europe \(I\) | by Ima Sri Rahmani | May, 2024 | Medium](#) )